

## Videos show racing greyhounds being trained with live lures — a banned method that critics call torture

Lee Rood Jason Clayworth, July 27, 2020

Iowa and several other states are investigating allegations of animal torture in the training of hundreds of racing greyhounds, some of which may have competed at Iowa Greyhound Park in Dubuque, the state's only remaining track.

Officials at GREY2K USA, a nonprofit group seeking to end dog racing, have provided Iowa racing and gaming regulators videos taken over the spring and summer that show greyhound handlers training young greyhounds by using live jackrabbits, a banned practice.

Some of the videos show handlers pulling the rabbits from cages, dragging them in front of the dogs and releasing them to be chased, maimed and killed.

Animal cruelty investigator Pete Paxton shot the footage with the permission of landowners from properties near greyhound training sites in Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas, according to GREY2K USA, which has been involved in other probes of greyhound abuse around the world.

So-called live lure training is prohibited in Iowa. State regulators can ban owners or trainers racing live-lure-trained dogs from the sport.

GREY2K USA gave the videos to authorities in the states where they were taken, as well as in Iowa, Arkansas, Florida and West Virginia, where the organization says the dogs were bred, individuals responsible for them were licensed or the owners of some of the dogs raced them.

In Florida — where greyhound racing is set to end this year — a Miami television station on Sunday broadcast an investigative story about the allegations. (Warning: the video with the story contains graphic images of animal cruelty.)

"These individuals need to be held responsible for their actions," said Carey Theil, GREY2K USA's executive director. "But more than that, we hope this is new information that should cause Iowa to reconsider their involvement in the industry. It's brutal, it's barbaric and completely and totally inexcusable."

Under Iowa gambling rules, no greyhound that has been trained using a live lure or live bait can be entered in a race.

The Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation will be involved in a review conducted by the Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission, said Brian Ohorilko, the group's administrator.

GREY2K USA said at least 102 dogs were trained at the facilities where it documented the use of live lures are actively racing, including at least seven at the Dubuque track.

"At this point, you know, we haven't been able to verify or corroborate any of that information," Ohorilko said.

The investigations in Iowa and elsewhere could have far-reaching effects, because so many dogs are affected in the states involved.

### Long-banned method

The American greyhound racing industry prohibited the use of live animals as bait 41 years ago after an expose on ABC's "20/20" news show prompted calls by some members of Congress to ban the sport.

Despite an industry promise to police itself in the wake of the report, live lure training has been exposed several times since then, though it has seldom involved Iowa breeders or owners.

This time, GREY2K USA tracked official breeding and whelping reports since 2017 that are maintained by the National Greyhound Association. It said the records indicate dogs owned by two Iowa Greyhound Association members and other Iowans were bred and trained at some of the training facilities it investigated.

The owners include the group's vice president, Tim Ertl of Dubuque, and board member Jason Hess of Pacific Junction. Hess owns a greyhound breeding farm and is the owner of Xtrem Hess Racing LLC.

Ertl and Hess referred the Register's request for comment to Jerry Crawford, attorney for the Iowa Greyhound Association, a nonprofit organization that runs Dubuque's track.

GREY2K USA has not provided its evidence to the association, but the board is confident there is no evidence of wrongdoing in Iowa or by Iowans, Crawford said in a written statement to the Register.

The association does not condone training with live lures and would support federal legislation to criminalize it, Crawford said. The Iowa Department of Agriculture inspects Iowa greyhound farms multiple times each year and has never found evidence of training with live lures, he wrote.

It would be "impossible" for owners of dogs at the out-of-state training facilities to know what is going on at those farms unless they visited and watched training, Crawford said. If an Iowa Greyhound Association member knew live lure training was happening, they would move their dogs to a different farm, he said.

"This is not an Iowa problem," Crawford said. "None of the conduct occurred in Iowa and none of the conduct was committed by Iowans."

The videos do not reveal the identities of the specific dogs engaged in live lure training. Theil said it is up to regulators and law enforcement officials to issue subpoenas and obtain that information from greyhound breeders and dog owners.

"It's troubling that Iowa greyhound owners continue to race these dogs in the face of serious questions about whether they were live lure trained," Theil said. "The prudent thing would be to hold back on racing these dogs until a full investigation has occurred. The fact that they are continuing to race is another example of how the industry puts profits ahead of animal welfare."

Live lure training is a felony in Texas and a misdemeanor in Oklahoma. Kansas does not have a law that specifically bans the training tactic, said Christine Dorchak, an attorney for GREY2K USA.

If authorities in any of the seven states notified confirm the training was widely used by the farms, which have bred and trained hundreds of dogs, it could prove to be a serious setback for the struggling sport.

Once legal in 19 states, commercial greyhound racing has been in decline since the 1990s in response to concerns raised by animal welfare activists, declining public interest and changes in the entertainment business and gambling. In addition, studies have shown the cost of regulating the sport is now greater than the revenue it generates.

Florida will end greyhound racing this year, and Arkansas will join it at the end of 2021. Texas' only active track announced this month it was closing. That will leave active tracks in only Iowa and West Virginia.

Internationally, only Australia, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Vietnam have active commercial dog racing tracks.

In Iowa, state-backed subsidies bolstering greyhound racing are set to expire at the end of 2021. Legislation to repeal subsidies in West Virginia was defeated last year.

Theil said industry officials maintain that trainers use artificial lures to train dogs to run around the oval dog tracks. But he said that, over the years, unscrupulous handlers have repeatedly tried to get a leg up on competitors by using live piglets, opossums, rabbits and other animals to entice dogs to run at top speed. It is considered a type of race fixing.

"Live lure training is still occurring," Theil said. "We believe this is one of the industry's dirty little secrets."

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